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## Drought conditions could spell a lean summer

By Tom Watts, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

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**Naturalist Julie Champion fears for animals and plants that live in the nature preserve at Metro Beach Metropark in Harrison Township. Severe drought conditions and the lack of precipitation this year could mean a dry summer.**



Macomb Daily photo by Ray J. Skowronek

The lack of precipitation and an increase in evaporation is not good news Lake St. Clair and connecting tributaries this winter, although experts agree a wet spring could change the drought-stricken outlook for 2003.

Compared to last year's average, Lake St. Clair's water levels are expected to be 7 inches lower in March and 13 inches lower by July, said Tim Talappi, a Physical Scientist for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit.

"Mainly we have high evaporation on Lake St. Clair," Talappi said. "Lake St. Clair gets a lot of its water from Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, which have been getting low supplies from Canada for the last seven months."

Talappi said precipitation, water runoff and inflow from other lakes contribute to the rise and fall of levels in Lake St. Clair. Low water levels in Canada mean lower water levels in the Great Lakes, Talappi said, which ultimately will decrease water levels in Lake St. Clair this summer.

According to the latest report issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Lake St. Clair was 4 inches lower than the average last January.

"It's still too early to tell if water levels will hurt us," said Eric Foster, a partner at Belle Maer Harbor. "I know the Army Corps is telling us it could 11 inches lower than last year by summer, but last year, if you remember, they said the same thing. We got rain and things worked out well."

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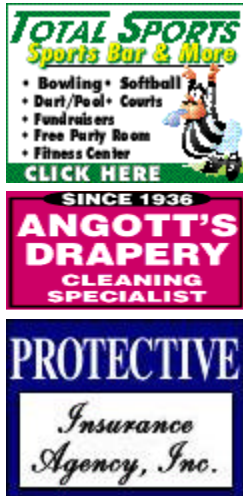
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Foster said the cold winter will help the annual spring rise in levels. "It's not an exact science," he said, "but the ice cover will help slow evaporation and the frost line will help water hopefully run off into the lakes and tributaries."

Naturalist Julie Champion from the Metro Beach Metropark Nature Center in Harrison Township said the lack of precipitation will hurt wildlife and plant life this spring. She said the marsh behind the Metro Beach public boat launch had "dried to mud flats by end of last season."

"We'd like to have more snow and lots of spring rain because we have none in most of our marshland," Champion said. "I would see big turtles trying to walk to the lakeshore for the winter, but the lack of water leaves them more vulnerable to freezing."

Champion said low water levels will hurt snapping turtles and Blanding turtles.

"We've lost muskrats, tadpoles, green frogs, and we lost a majority of them. The numbers will down this year again."

Champion noted the discovery of a new alien species called, the European frog bit, which can thrive in drought-like conditions.

"If that European frog bit got into canals it would be bad news," she said. "It's a thick floating mass, a water lily. You don't want it in your canals."

Despite the conditions, Champion said she was encouraged by the re-emergence of nesting great horned owls at the nature preserve.

"We had a nesting pair of horned owls in the past, but the last three years they did not nest because of a lack of food and prey," Champion said. "But they're back in their nests this year. I think the lack of food, like muskrat and rabbits, drought conditions, and everything else over the last couple years, has impacted things."

Chesterfield Township Supervisor Jim Ellis said low water conditions will spell trouble for recreational boaters this summer.

"The canals, most of them, will have to be dredged before boaters can get in and out," Ellis said. "If water levels don't rise, it will probably be a pretty rough season for boaters who dock at home."

Mike Thomas, a biologist with the Department of Natural Resources, said there are short-term and long-term effects in droughts.

"It's been dry for several years, that's not good for most, but low water conditions increase plant growth in the water," Thomas said. "Conditions present opportunities for emerging plants to recover around the St. Clair River channel."

Thomas said low water levels have produced an increase in bulrush and cattails.

"If lake levels recover," he said, "then those places will be valuable spawning areas later on. Great Lakes coastal water fluctuations provide fish habitat for periods of high water. That's good."

But Thomas admits the "scary part" will be the effects of long-term climatic changes.


"We are seeing warmer winters, less ice cover and less precipitation,"

Thomas said. "There's a possibility we might see more noticeable changes in fish species over time. Of course, that's speculation at this time."

Thomas warned boaters and fishermen to have navigational maps of Lake St. Clair this year and learn about water depths.

"One thing about low water levels is it gets to be a bit hazardous for fisherman to travel around the lake," Thomas said. "During these times people have to make sure they know where they are in the channels and in the St. Clair Flats area."

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